Veracity in Voracity: On the Function of Essayistic Practices in Artistic Research

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VERACITY IN VORACITY: ON THE FUNCTION OF ESSAYISTIC PRACTICES IN ARTISTIC RESEARCH

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Abstract*:*
By embracing digression, the essay as a prominent mode of expression in artistic research promises a different kind of insight than classic discursive logic. Because digressions are by definition without method, it is notoriously difficult to analyze their function within a work of art. By looking at the short text 'Fresh Figs' by the essayist Walter Benjamin, I suggest that the digression of digestion triggers a veracity beyond propositional knowledge. This could serve as a means to sharpen the comprehension of the epistemic status of an essay's constellation: Rather than saying what it is about, it shows it; rather than articulating its findings with words, it relies on the critical judgement of the senses.

The Essay's epistemic procedure

As shown in Nicolaj van der Meulen's and Jörg Wiesel's essay on the dialogue as aesthetic practice, Diderot and d'Alembert use the rhetoric device of the literary digression to narrow in on their conclusion. The digression into the absurd scenario rendering a statue edible is telling and intriguing precisely because of its absurdity. Yet as readers, we hardly mind this extravagance. On the contrary, we embrace it for its originality, for its allegorical obscureness. It seems that within the confines of a digression, – which is marked as a sort of literary heterotopy – it is possible to let imagination roam a little more freely than scientific coherence would allow. By letting a straight line of reasoning become curved and meandering, new and unexpected insights can be had, poetic passages can catch the reader's attention and even the most difficult decisions can resolve themselves. In its endeavor to establish alternative epistemic practices to those known to the scientific community, artistic research is again and again confronted with the problem of an adequate expression. If it takes seriously its claims of alternative forms of knowledge and insight, it cannot simply resort to established scientific styles of writing. If we believe in the notion that form and content are one, artistic research will never yield fully satisfactory results if it has to translate its findings from an aesthetic to a propositional episteme to be recognized as a valid scientific practice. The essay, poised between those two epistemes, offers a negotiating ground for artistic research as a field of genuine epistemic value.

For the sake of gaining a better understanding of the essay, it is advisable to consult Adorno's seminal *The Essay as Form* from 1958. In a remarkable passage, he talks about how the essay is closing in on its topic. Like someone who is learning a new language in real life situations as opposed to in the study with a

dictionary, the essay won't boil down the meaning of a word to a corresponding one in a different language.[1] Depending on the circumstance, words have different connotations, one cannot learn the nuances of an applied language (Saussure's *parole*) in an abstract setting because the circumstances are as much part of the meaning of words as their denotations. So the essay's topic emerges from a configuration or constellation of aspects much like we slowly begin to understand a new word through its use. Its meaning is necessarily open and subject to constant refinement or change even.
More importantly however, the status of its meaning is liminal. It is on its way to become propositional knowledge but it isn't quite there yet – and maybe it will never quite arrive. This potentially never ending motion towards something, the constant emergence of meaning is fundamental to the epistemic procedure of the essay.

Saying / Showing

One way of understanding the difference between an essayistic and a traditional scientific practice lies in the different valuation of saying and showing. Whereas science heavily relies on propositional articulation (saying), the essay operates in the more performative mode of showing and exemplifying. Thereby, it doesn't degrade showing to a didactic, albeit redundant practice: "Giving examples is not an indirect means of explaining—in default of a better. For any general definition can be misunderstood too."[2]
Just as a simple translation for a word you heard again and again in different circumstances can seem unsatisfactory, insights made from essayistic procedures can often not be satisfyingly articulated. This is because the essay does not only operate with propositional but with performative knowledge: Some things need to be experienced in order to understand them. And once you experienced them, you cannot simply say what it was that you experienced, or, more precisely, by talking about the experience, you cannot reproduce how it enabled certain insights.
Digression lies at the heart of exemplifying practices. By allowing digressions from the seemingly straight line of reasoning and by constellating such digressions, the essay does much less strive to make explicit insights on its topic but provide a "force field [Kraftfeld]" as Adorno calls it, in which the recipient will come to his or her own conclusions.[3]

Fresh Figs

For the sake of demonstrating how digression and aesthetic, performative practices can create an immensely strong epistemic force field that can help to come to conclusions and overcome uncertainties in unexpected ways, I will use a very short story, a 'Denkbild' [thought-image] from Walter Benjamin called *Fresh Figs* (originally published in the Frankfurter Zeitung, May 1930).

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[1] Theodor W. Adorno: „Der Essay als Form", in: *Noten zur Literatur*, Frankfurt am Main, 1958, S. 29.
[2] Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, Translated by G. Anscombe, Oxford, 1958, § 71.
[3] Adorno 1958, 30.

Benjamin is not a random choice in the realm of the essay. Adorno calls him the "unequaled master [unerreichter Meister]" of essayistic procedures in his literary as well as his more theoretical texts.[4] His very many experiments with literary forms from aphorisms to montage culminate in the Arcades-Project [Passagen-Werk], which remained a fragment. Of this, Adorno claimed that is was constructed in a way that it would do without any apparent interpretation and that meaning shall come only from the shocking montage of its material.[5] In this almost utopian understanding of a configurative practice, it seems as though Benjamin was set to let something else speak for itself, he was positive that through the constellation of given material, something could be shown that otherwise could not have been articulated in his own, explaining words. And so Benjamin states in the Arcades-Project: "I have nothing to say. Only to show. [Ich habe nichts zu sagen. Nur zu zeigen.]"[6]

The plot of the story is easily reproduced: The first person narrator is in naples – for what reason we don't know. He has been carrying with him a letter for some time, pondering about whether he should send it or not. Apparently the content of the letter would be of consequences that are either intimidating because of their gravity or hard to predict. In this frame of mind he travels by tram to a suburb – for what reasons we again don't know – where he, seemingly without any destination strolls around. Out of sheer idleness he buys half a pound of fresh figs from an old lady. Since she didn't have any bags or a paper to wrap the figs in, he stuffed all his pockets with them and carried the rest in his arms and his mouth. He of course started to eat the figs, but it was

> "more like a bath, so powerful was the smell of resin that penetrated all my belongings, clung to my hands and impregnated the air through which I carried my burden. And then, after satiety and revulsion – the final bends in the path – had been surmounted, came the ultimate mountain peak of taste. A vista over an unsuspected landscape of the palate spread out before my eyes – an insipid, undifferentiated, greenish flood of greed that could distinguish nothing but the stringy, fibrous waves of the flesh of the open fruit, the utter transformation of enjoyment into habit, of habit into vice. A hatred of those figs welled up inside me; I was desperate to finish them, to liberate myself, to rid myself of all this overripe, bursting fruit. I ate to destroy it. Biting had rediscovered its most ancient purpose. When I pulled the last fig from the depths of my pocket, the letter was stuck to it. Its fate was sealed; it, too, had to succumb to the great purification. I took it and

[4] Adorno 1958, 28.
[5] Theodor W. Adorno: *Über Walter Benjamin*. Frankfurt, 1990, S. 22
[6] Walter Benjamin: *Passagen-Werk.* Gesammelte Schriften Bd. V, hrsg. v. R. Tiedemann & H.
Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt 1991. S. 574

> tore it into a thousand pieces."[7]

This is quite a remarkable account for a form of aesthetic thinking. It is aesthetic because it is rooted entirely in a bodily sensation and it is a form of thinking because by provoking the decision to tear apart the letter, the sensation develops into an actual critical instance.

Profane Illumination

This little story is particularly telling in many ways. First off, it clearly marks the voracity as a digression from an ongoing conflict. It was "sheer idleness [Müssiggang]" and "sheer extravagance [Verschwendung]" that made him buy the figs. He did not think anything of these figs, they were no sign, no metaphor, they were everyday objects that stood for little more than the distraction by a sweet delight.

But then, through excess and intoxication, the figs become an enabler of a 'profane illumination' [profane Erleuchtung], a concept that Benjamin developed in his essay on surrealism. He sees bodily intoxication as an epistemic means to gain insights far more potent than those achievable through a study [Untersuchung].[8]

When we hear intoxication with Benjamin, many may think of his meticulous records of experiences with hashish. But these profane illuminations, as he notes, are not linked to the taking of drugs. They are a form of materialistic inspiration that is often linked to an everyday bodily experience. In the context of a profane illumination, the fig becomes the forbidden fruit, which not only causes expulsion from paradise but also marks the beginning of human knowledge. With Benjamin, the consummation of the figs and the insight that came from it, bear no consequences other than resolution. Profane illuminations are free from the fear of a punishing authority, for it is the human body itself that enables the insight.

Veracity in Voracity

At the end of the short text, the narrator ate himself into a state of rage in which his only goal it is to free himself from the figs. He calls this process great purification [grosse Reinigung].[9] The resolution to tear apart the letter is a simple continuation from his way to cope with the burden of the fruits: "I ate to destroy" he says, and "biting had rediscovered its most ancient purpose." It seems that this destructive atavism needed the trigger of a very simple, albeit extreme bodily experience in order to release its power. Only in this state of bodily excitement, the postponement of a reasonable decision (to send or not to send the letter) can come to a sudden end.

It is so sudden and unexpected, that the narrator needs to write down the occurrence in order to make an attempt at understanding what was going on.

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[7] Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, Part 1. Harvard University Press 2005, 359.
[8] Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften, Bd. II/1, hrsg. v. R. Tiedemann & H. Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt am Main 1977, S. 309.
[9] Which is immensely ironic, because it is one of the deadly sins (gluttony), that leads to this purification.

Luckily, he chooses not to make explicit what happened, for it would suffocate the charm of his essayistic writing that is intriguing precisely because it simply shows by giving this example. It may be thanks to introspection that Benjamin wrote down this story – but for once, its epistemic moment is not linked to any form of willful reflexivity.
Only by digressing "from the straight and narrow road of the appetite" the narrator stumbles upon "the primeval forest of greed" where he finds a peculiar veracity in his voracity.

Neugier – The greed for the new

The german word for greed is Gier. There are two other words in german that contain Gier, but interestingly, both are not necessarily negatively connoted. There is Neugier [curiosity; literally greed for something new] and Begierde [desire, lust]. With those compounds, the German language shows a productive side of voracity and greed. There lies great potential in the fact that we are driven by our bodies sensory discoveries and needs.
So great in fact, that Augustinus and the catholic church feared it. As we saw, the profane illuminations of our senses are free from the fear of a punishing authority. Subsequently, the church must fear for its power. So curiosity was put under a moral ban for centuries. The concupiscentia ocularum [greed of the eyes] was one of the cardinal vices. Its aesthetic pleasure was condemned as void and vicious.
It is hard to imagine in what kind of world we would live in if we hadn't left behind such a doctrine. Is modernity imaginable without its Neugierde, and without having rooted its epistemic hunger in the physis rather the metaphysis? It seems to me that an artistic or aesthetic research is asking: Why not continuing on this path? Why not embracing the momentum and insights of our sensory apparatus to the full? If there are no words to adequately represent what this kind of science is trying to convey, it is probably on the right track.

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